Just Great Teaching

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Just Great Teaching

How to tackle the top ten issues in UK classrooms

Ross Morrison McGill

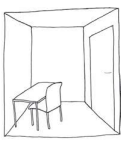
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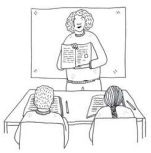
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Introduction

When I set about thinking how to write this book, my starting point was the frustrations with our school system at a national level. There are so many issues that are pouring down from above, impinging on teachers and schools across the nation and hindering them from being able to do the best job they can for our young people. Currently, these challenges include school funding, high-stakes accountability and continually changing goalposts in relation to curriculum and assessment, among many others.

Via my social media channels, where I have over 250,000 followers, and my website, which has reached ten million readers, I have been able to develop a wider perspective on educational issues, and I feel frustrated with the current political dialogue. Increasingly, I am receiving messages from teachers across the country who are concerned about how teaching is evolving in the modern era. With more and more demands being placed on teachers, they are finding themselves tied to their desks, both during and after school hours, rather than working on their feet in the classroom alongside students.

With every government that comes and goes, teachers and school leaders always seem to find themselves left in the lurch, waiting for the politicians to determine the next 'quick fix' or hoping they might provide a new source of funding to help address the latest crisis that schools have been asked to resolve. In Scotland and Wales, perceptions of education ministers are more positive than the current mood in Northern Ireland or England, and I do wonder what we can learn from one another across the United Kingdom rather than searching for the answers on the other side of the world. Personally, having worked in education for over 25 years, I have seen so many education ministers, on both sides of the political spectrum, come into office with new ideas, ambitions and policies, but what difference has it really made to the classroom teacher? Regardless of policy, when the classroom door is shut, the teacher will always be in charge whatever policy or ideology is promoted.

It is my firm belief that no government will ever have all the solutions for our education system. If we hang around, waiting and hoping for our politicians to find the answers, we will be forever disappointed. In my view, we must instead search for practical solutions within our own communities – from our fellow teachers and school leaders. As a profession, we are a collective force. We have so much to learn from one another, and we can do more to resolve the issues we are facing together.

The top ten issues in UK education

The challenges we experience in our classrooms day to day are influenced by factors in three broad areas:

- **Macro:** politics, accountability structures, funding and socio-economic factors.
- **Meso:** school-level organisation, the school community and local services.
- **Micro:** the classroom, the teacher and the child.

There are countless research articles exploring the political and socio-economic factors that influence what happens in our classrooms. However, the ability to change national issues lies very much on the doorstep of policymakers. A perfect example of this is school funding. In 2019, an online petition calling for increased funding for schools gathered over 100,000 signatures, but this is by no means a new issue. As far back as 1976, Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan said:

'There can be little expectation of further increased resources being made available [for education], at any rate for the time being. I fear that those whose only answer to these problems is to call for more money will be disappointed […] There is a challenge to us all […] to secure as high efficiency as possible by the skilful use of existing resources.'

Does generation after generation simply repeat the same assumptions about education for tomorrow, despite what we know about yesterday and today?

Personally, I strongly believe that we cannot have a world-class education system funded on a shoestring, and will go on actively promoting this cause, but it's clear that this isn't an issue that's going to be resolved any time soon. When we are struggling in our day-to-day jobs due to these macro-level factors, we can and should go on protesting and lobbying the government, and making our voices heard. However, at a practical level, these factors are mostly out of our hands as teachers and school leaders. It is at the meso and micro levels that we can have a greater impact. Despite the statutory guidance sent down from on high, there are positive steps we can take to modify our own practice as classroom teachers and to instigate change as school leaders to ensure we are offering our students the great teaching we know we are capable of delivering.

To achieve this, we must work together openly to solve complex problems, share ideas and discuss 'what works', rather than remain in our silos. Teachers, of course, want to develop a good understanding of neuroscience and 'how we learn', and research is becoming critical to informing our practice in the classroom, but ultimately teachers need practical advice from their peers. Neuroscience, psychology and research are all vital to great teaching and do play their part, yet add 30 students into the picture and the work of a teacher becomes much more complicated. For me, the secret ingredient in bringing great teaching to life is translating all of these complex theories and ideas into practical, workable solutions. In this book, I therefore distil what I have learnt from the research, evidence and psychology behind teaching, as well as my own experiences of working within education and the great practice I have seen taking place in schools across the country.

I have the privilege of working with schools every week and I speak with fellow educators on a daily basis, discussing the complexities of education and our work as teachers and school leaders. This perspective has given me a broad lens through which to view the challenges we are facing and also consider what we can do both to improve our practice as individuals and to disseminate great teaching ideas across the profession, without fear of high-stakes accountability ending someone's career or closing down the school. It is my belief that this must be the future model for improving schools.

From the experiences and discussions I've had with thousands of educators I have either worked with or engaged with via social media, I have collated a list of ten key issues for teachers and school leaders to tackle and get right in their practice.

These ten issues are:

1. marking and assessment

2. planning, including EdTech

3. teaching and learning

4. teacher wellbeing

5. student mental health

6. behaviour and exclusions

7. supporting students with SEND

8. curriculum

9. research-led practice

10. continuing professional development (CPD).

Each chapter in this book explores one of these key areas, discussing why the area in question is a challenging and important issue for teachers and schools across the country, and then offering five ideas for how to tackle the issue, taken from my own practice working with schools that are excelling in these areas across the UK.

I hope the ideas in this book provide a starting point for each of us to celebrate the wonderful work that we are all doing in schools, regardless of setting. I hope they will help to uncover, celebrate, analyse and disseminate best practice in teaching across the UK, and open your eyes to how particular problems can be resolved based on what other professionals are doing effectively in a similar context to your own.

To achieve anything of greatness requires collaboration with others; no school, headteacher or teacher can achieve ***Just Great Teaching*** without the support of their colleagues. It is important to look at other jurisdictions that are doing things well, such as Shanghai, Finland or Japan, but we must also start to engineer a more conscientious focus on what's working within our own contexts to help shape the narrative. Not only will this enable us to improve our provision for young people in our own settings, but it also has the potential to entice the next generation of teachers into the profession, and entice those who may have left it prematurely, including myself, to come back.

Research methodology

The practical ideas offered in this book are supported by case studies from ten schools from across the UK, each excelling in one of the ten areas of practice highlighted above. In choosing these schools, it was not a case of cherry-picking 'the best' schools based on accountability metrics, exam performance, political ideology or teaching approaches. Instead, I used my own experiences of working within education to identify a range of settings that are facing the challenges that

all schools across the country face, including your own, and to explore what these settings are doing well in the face of these challenging contexts.

As part of my research for the book, I visited each of the ten schools and interviewed a member of staff – the headteacher, a school leader or a teacher leading on a particular area of practice. Before my visit, each representative completed an online questionnaire to identify the areas of strengths and challenges in the school, and the areas of practice in which they felt most and least confident.

I subsequently recorded face-to-face interviews with each school representative from September to December 2018, exploring their responses to the questionnaire and steering the focus towards a particular theme that the school had self-identified as an area in which they believed their school was excelling. These interviews entailed nearly ten hours of recorded conversations – a book in itself – and you will find snippets from the interviews, all published with the interviewee's permission, in **speech bubbles** throughout the chapters.

In addition to the research conducted with the ten schools featured as case studies, I also set up an online questionnaire, open to all educators, which I publicised via social media. Between October 2018 and March 2019, I received 236 responses predominantly from teachers and school leaders across the UK and a handful working in other European countries. There were 12 overall questions in the survey, and three of those were split into 11 sub-questions, giving a total of 42 fields of entry. With 236 responses, this equates to nearly 10,000 pieces of data. Some insights from this data are also provided throughout the chapters; look out for the **microscope**.



Great teaching

Great teaching is not something that can be left to chance or assumption. To illustrate this, allow me to share an anecdote from Graham Nuthall's (2007) *The Hidden Lives of Learners*, a study of the complex world of the classroom, which we will explore in more detail in Chapter 1, page 13. Nuthall recounts an incident in a classroom on a typical school afternoon, a scenario all teachers can relate to, where some students take their classmate's pen away from him during a test. The pen is passed around behind his back and he can't for the life of him work out who has it. The class are giggling uncontrollably behind the teacher's back, but she thinks they're laughing at one of her jokes. The teacher goes on to gather the test papers and sends them off to be scored. As Nuthall says, 'These scores will be entered into machines where they will be transformed in complex and sophisticated graphs and tables that politicians and newspaper editors will use to berate and praise – you know that story.'

So, let me ask you: do these test scores really reflect what's going on in that classroom?

Our politicians try to measure the hallmarks of great teaching, introducing various frameworks that come and go with the wind, and in my opinion, they continue to miss the mark, blurring their roles and responsibilities of working with schools. Great teaching appears to be a straightforward approach, but it in fact requires years and years of deliberate practice. Much like Beyoncé performing on the

concert stage, teachers must spend hours practising behind the scenes. Beyond the exam scores, teachers hone and refine their techniques and reflect on decisions, before squeezing all this expertise into repeated, focused performances in the classroom.

When it comes to teaching, if we do not disentangle the myths from reality, we will remain slaves to a system that inevitably produces failure and widens inequality. We must transform our practice, so all students can leave school with a range of successful qualifications. If we truly want a world-class education system in which all children can succeed and be prepared for the workplace, we must tweak our current approaches. We must give all children the opportunity to thrive, and doing so begins with ***Just Great Teaching***.

How to use this book

This book is designed to meet the needs of busy classroom teachers and school leaders. We know teachers are time-poor and professional development is hit and miss in many schools, so I hope ***Just Great Teaching*** will offer teachers bite-sized information and practical ideas in an easy-to-use format. To all the school leaders who take on one of society's greatest responsibilities, I hope this book also offers you some insight into what other schools are doing, so that you can reflect on your own journey and take some of the research-informed ideas and translate them into your own setting.

What to expect in each chapter

Each of the ten chapters in this book focuses on tackling one key area of teaching practice that I know teachers and school leaders are keen to get right. This book can be read cover to cover, but feel free to hone in on the chapters most relevant to you and read them in isolation. Every chapter is divided into the following four sections.

1. Why is this an issue?

This introductory section offers context about the issue in question. Supported by national statistics and research, it explains why the issue is a particular challenge across the UK at the time of writing.

Don't expect to see the word 'Ofsted' in this book, other than in this sentence*. I'll be referring to the English watchdog throughout this book as the 'Grim Reaper'. I'll leave those of you in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland to come up your own nicknames for your inspectorates…

*and for the purposes of referencing and indexing



2. How can we tackle it?



This practical section is split into five distinct ideas, which I hope teachers and school leaders will find useful in their everyday practice. Each idea begins with a short summary to help you dip in and out and find the strategies you need. There is a wide range of ideas for both classroom teachers and school leaders to consider. If you're not yet at leadership level, remember that change can be led from the ground up, and I hope you will feel confident to discuss the whole-school ideas with your line manager and colleagues.

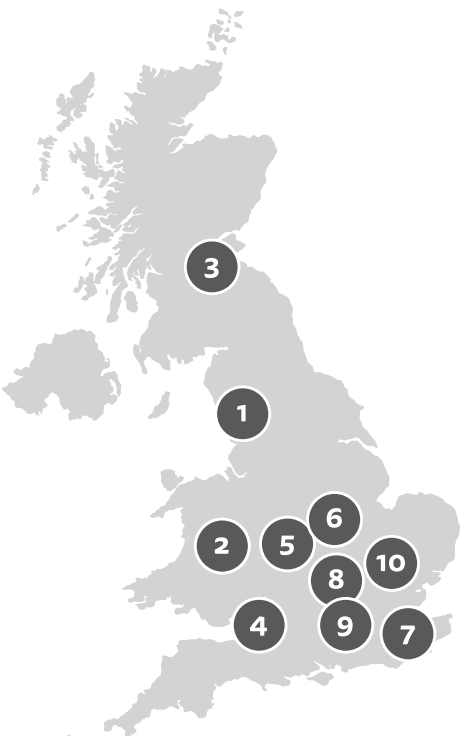
As with all ideas, it's the implementation that matters most and context is key, so please do not take these ideas away as 'the thing to do' or something that you *should* be doing.

3. School case study



Each chapter features a case study from a school operating in the UK. There are a range of contexts and locations represented; each school is shown on the map below. The case studies are written by representatives of the schools themselves and explain how their teachers and school leaders are meeting the specific challenge in question well, in their own contexts.

I feel privileged to have been invited into each school and for the time each school offered me, helping me to understand their context and practice at a deeper level.



1. Layton Primary School, Blackpool
2. Ysgol Henry Richard, Ceredigion
3. Fettes College, Edinburgh
4. Parson Street Primary School, Bristol
5. Queen Mary's Grammar School, Walsall
6. CP Riverside School, Nottingham
7. Homewood School and Sixth Form Centre, Tenterden
8. Magdalen College School, Oxford
9. Slough and Eton Church of England Business and Enterprise College, Slough
10. Trumpington Community College, Cambridge

4. Why does this work?



Each chapter concludes with insights from an educationalist known for their work in the area discussed within the chapter. These contributions offer an explanation as to why and how the ideas in the chapter may work and provide a fresh perspective on the issues discussed.

Get in touch

As you read, I would strongly recommend sharing ideas and thoughts with colleagues in your school in your own professional development sessions. You may want to consider starting a book club and using each chapter of this book as a discussion starter for colleagues. If so, please get in touch and I'd be happy to provide the resources you need to get started. I would also gladly take any questions or signpost you in the direction of further ideas and resources.

You can find me on social media **@TeacherToolkit** and tweet me your thoughts using the hashtag **#JustGreatTeaching**. You can also search for 'Just Great Teaching' on my website www.teachertoolkit.co.uk or email me at support@teachertoolkit.co.uk.